

PLANET
stories

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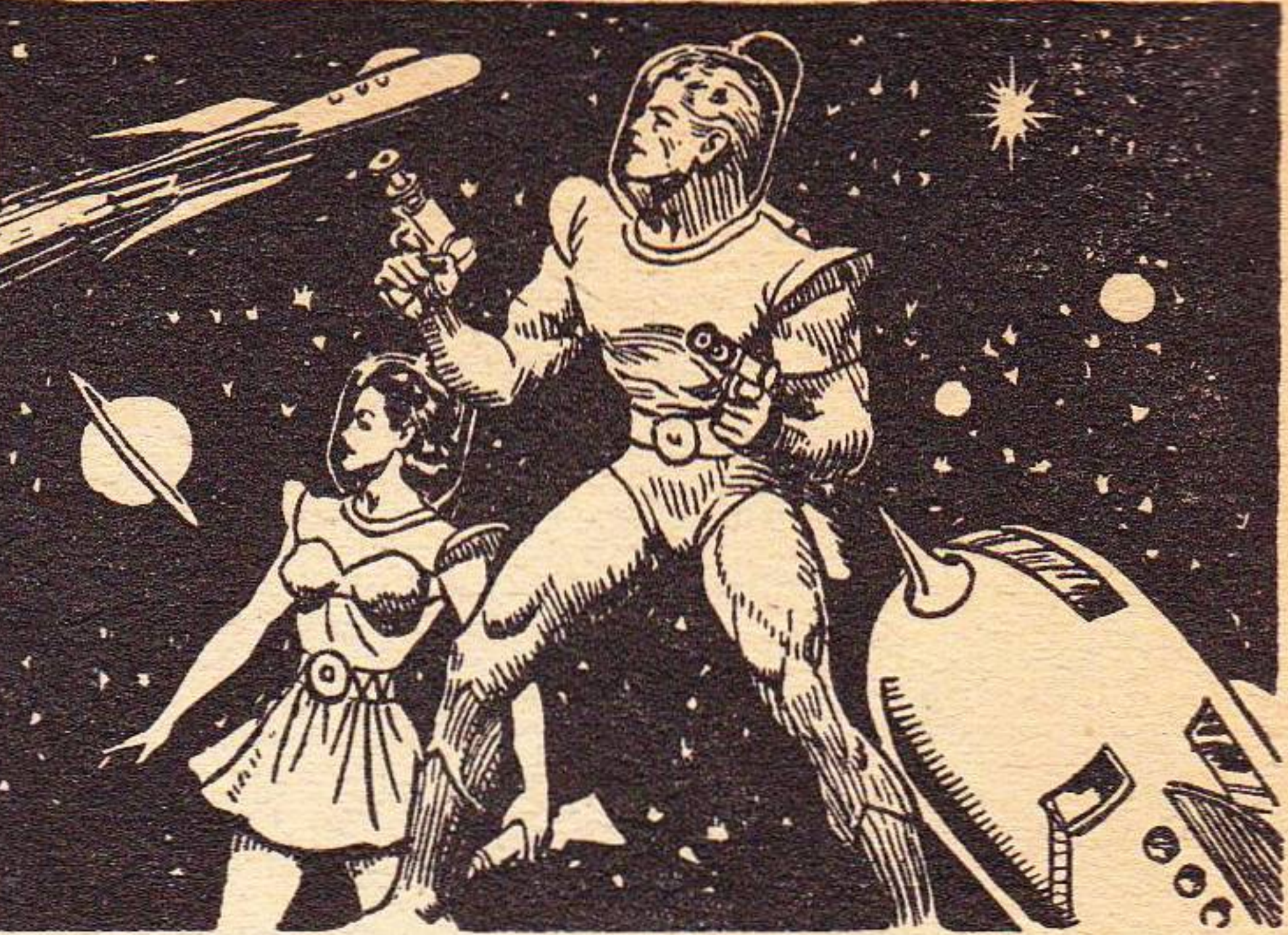
DE PINA
WALTON
GARSON

VASSALS *of the* LODGE-STAR

SNATCHED FROM SPACE AND TIME
TO SERVE A CRYSTAL FLAME!

Novel by GARDNER F. FOX

PLANET STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, Pres.

MALCOLM REISS, Gen. Mgr.

PAUL L. PAYNE, Ed.

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Ward yelled, "Red! I understand now! Don't open it!"

MO-SANSHON!

By Bryce Walton

Only Professor Ward knew they were on Earth, could almost hear them rustling behind their humanoid faces. Then Red came to help him, and of course he had to trust Red. But—could he?

HIS GAUNT FIGURE slumped wearily in the only chair in the otherwise bare cube, while the telaudio pronounced its immutable sentence.

The world psychometric council finds you, Doctor Jonathan Ward, a paranoic with advanced delusions of persecution and of grandeur. Your belief in a super-insect menace threatening humanoid culture we find unsupported by logical evidence. You will be subjected to the reconditioning and readjustment clinics as authorized in Title C, Section 890, Article 72, Paragraph 18,

Lines 72-86, Revised Solar Statutes, 2166. Section C-890-72, Article 18-1-W, Solar Statutory Psychometry.

As the dry and precise voice faded from the six-by-six screen, long suppressed panic hit Ward like a sudden sickness. He ran to the smooth panel of the door.

An irrational reflex! Both door and single exit window could be activated only from the outside. He was two hundred floors up, isolated in a Verdict Cube in Washington's Federal Building. Administrative Guards would be here soon to take him away. And when they released him

from the clinics he wouldn't be John Ward any more. He would be someone else; it wouldn't matter who, because by then the Mo-Sanshon would have accomplished their purpose. The solar humanoid culture would have become only a passing incident in geological history together with the giant ferns, the saurians, and now—*super insects!* God, no wonder they labeled him psycho! No one believed. It was too ridiculous. It had been trite thematic material for emotionalizing fiction for so long—

But the Martian subterranean ant-like culture, the Mo-Sanshon, were directly responsible for his failure! Somehow, he didn't know even tentatively, they had infiltrated. They either controlled humanoids in high, influential positions by telepathy, or could, in some ingenious physiogenic way, assume human form. He knew that Vassco and Greever on the Psychometric Council had been prejudiced by some influence other than reason.

He ran to the translucent window. He pummeled his aching brain, while the polychromatic light harmonics corruscated ironically through the transparent plastic walls. His fevered eyes looked out on a black sea of velvet night and millions of splotches of cold phosphorescence. Dark airtaxis glided past on traffic beams—glided unknowingly past the imprisoned entomologist who alone out of the billions on Earth and Mars had probed the fantastic, aged secrets of the Mo-Sanshon.

He pressed his temples desperately, felt the pounding of his heart. If he'd only been able to get physical evidence of their infiltration. If they could duplicate human form, then why hadn't any of them been captured, or have left some trace of their alien derivation?

He sagged against the wall as the photo-electric banks of the door functioned oillily, the rippling light harmonies dying to a monotone grey. Three uniformed Guards stood a moment, looking at Ward curiously while the panel closed. They were precise and mechanistic. The larger one, with an abnormally red face, said in a level, toneless voice, "Well, Doctor Ward. Are you ready?"

His vision blurred with tears as he stumbled toward them. When he stepped outside that door everything that signified Jona-

than Ward would be altered. He would become a new, reconditioned personality, remembering nothing of the past he knew now, because it would no longer exist. Everything he had experienced that created the complex cause and effect mechanism of his mind would be eliminated from his psychogenes. And, like billions of other naive minions of the Solar Federation, he would be completely bewildered, surprised, horrified and subsequently annihilated or enslaved by the Mo-Sanshon.

They had stepped to either side of him. But the sound of photo-electric banks came again—from behind them—from the window. The sound was followed by a sharp, nasal voice.

"Get back against the wall, Gestapo! Unless you want to play tag with a needle-gun."

WARD'S stunned brain turned him around warily, slowly. He stared and blinked. He saw one of the Guard's hands dive for his service paralysis ray gun. There was a sharp *thunggg* from the little wiry man crouched by the open window, and an air needle punctured the Guard's chest. He cried out feebly as he fell unmoving at Ward's feet.

The remaining two froze in incredulous fear. The red-faced one seemed abnormally affected; his eyes bulged, face twitched. The little man, clothed in the natty pale blue garb of an airtaxi driver, motioned with his gun. Small black eyes with rusty flecks glittered dangerously.

"You, Doc!" he clipped. "Get out the window. These puppets are liable to go hysterical any minute."

Hope spurted inside Ward, ran through his brain like a rat in a garret, as he fell away from the Guards and found himself before the open window. An airtaxi was parked there, held by the grapple rail.

The Guards were strongly conditioned, so strongly that the possibility of Ward escaping overcame their blue funk. Desperately they sprang in a half-hearted attack, whipping out their guns.

"Chicken-gutted jackasses!" spat the taxidriver, firing again and plunging the first Guard moaning on his face. The big, red-skinned Guard slewed to one side; as he fell to escape the taxidriver's aim, he pressed the stud of his paralysis ray. The

taxidriver fell clear by a hair's breadth beneath the stream of blue fire. Another needle twanged.

What happened then would have appalled the most sanguine and capacious imagination. Ward's brain crawled; his stomach dropped with nausea and horror. The room swirled like madness unveiling herself as the dying Guard's mouth opened and a tattered scream pierced the confined space. And then the Guard's body began to disintegrate.

Some chemical reaction process, working at astounding, chain-reaction speed, reduced the whole body and uniform, within a few seconds, to a small liquid puddle which vaporized leaving no sign that such a Guard had ever existed, except the paralysis gun and a few bits of alloy.

The taxidriver said casually. "The Mo-Sanshon, Doc."

Ward gulped. "The Mo—"

"That's the reason they're never found out, Doc. Suicidals. When they suspect there's even a dim possibility of discovery, they release a catalyst into their blood stream. That's what happens."

"But surely," choked Ward, "someone has seen—"

"What? They can never prove they've seen what doesn't exist any more. Psycho cells have always been loaded with patients who claimed to see what wasn't there. Come on, let's dust out of this hole!"

Peculiarly ancient jargon, though Ward, *even for a taxidriver*. He stepped onto the narrow ramp. A cold night wind cooled his fever and new hope strengthened him.

"Who the devil are you?" he said faintly, as the taxidriver closed the window to the Verdict Cube and dropped down beside him in the front seat of the open air tourist taxi.

He grinned thinly, recklessly. "Another psycho the Council hasn't labeled yet. Name's Red. Red Formica. To be pedantic, you might call me a victim of regression, an atavist. Things have got to have a tag, you know." He released the magnetic grapples, and punched the controls. The air-taxi darted out into a traffic beam, and lunged downward.

Before Ward could formulate further questions the taxi dropped heavily down on a dark, small rooflanding on the lowest, cheapest level of the city. He allowed him-

self to be led down a shabby, creaking escalator and through a narrow corridor into an ill-lighted room, thick with the reeking heavy drug of the Venusian bluerose. The occasional gurgle of mind-burning *selir*-whiskey and the dull monody of a three-piece Ionian orchestra completed the morbid setting.

A forbidden underground escapeasy!

Here, men of the lower income brackets, who couldn't afford the far-flung exotic worlds of the System, came to escape their monotonous, colorless lot.

Ward gaped. Back in his small, provincial midwest college laboratory he had never, of course, expected to end up in an escapeasy. Dim, lethargic shadows stirred in the drugged gloom and from somewhere a girl's soft laughter called. The scrofuous dive was permeated with a heavy air of solemn, self-induced asphyxiation.

RED led Ward to a table, and they became a part of the vaporous shadows. "Two glasses of *satho*," said Red familiarly. A vague form, apparently the barkeep, glided away and returned almost immediately with the cold, stealthy liquor.

"A toast, Doc," said Red tightly. "To a quick victory over the Mo-Sanshon—all ten trillion or so of them."

Ward nodded numbly, and wondered how his thirty-eight years of academic research could have qualified him for this. He had sweated out a hermit's life on the burning Martian Deserts for four years, gathering his data on the Mo-Sanshon who filled the countless miles of catacombs under the red clay surface, and he had considered that an all time low—at the time.

He drank. The liquor scorched his throat and started quickly on his brain. He belched and wiped tears from his eyes. Finally he managed to whisper, "I'd appreciate a sort of hint as to what this is all about."

Red's freckled nose wrinkled. "I have a good story. Very credible. I just want to help you. Not because I give a damn about whether humanity stays around or not. But because I crave excitement. If you need a reason, that's as good as any." He drained his glass stoically and called for a refill.

"Real tiger-milk," he grinned. His red hair flamed as a dancing girl slid by with

a hokohloo lamp spinning its sense-drunkening harmonies in a jeweled hand.

"But how do you know so much about all this?" insisted Ward.

"We cabbies get around." Which didn't explain much. Or did it?

"But why should you believe me, when no one else does?"

"I just want to, Doc, that's all. I think the old anarchistic culture was better than this puking state of the proletariat we've got now. Got most of my education from the past—nineteenth and early twentieth century literature. And I live in the underground ghettos of the present. Wishful thinking. I only hope you're right, probably."

"I assure you," pleaded Ward. "I'm not a psycho."

"I don't give a damn whether you're psycho or not. So am I. Anyway, we're killers now, gangsters. Unheard of in our perfect little futile order. So unheard of that we'll probably get away with it easier than we think."

Ward shrugged. "I've got some equipment that must get to Mars very quickly, if my fight against the Mo-Sanshon is to be effective. Speed is essential."

"Want to get them in the heart," said Red.

"Why . . . er . . . yes. Their headquarters, their center of operation. In fact, to get the Queen Mother alone should be sufficient. The real intelligence, I believe, is only a small inner circle of mutations."

Red leaned over the table. His rust colored eyes shown eagerly. "Then let's go, Doc!"

Ward's lips curled. "There wasn't a chance before, let alone now."

"I've got it all fixed, Doc," said Red. "What do you think I brought you here for?"

"I've been wondering," said Ward dryly.

"We antisocials stick together here. Kind of an underground cult, you know. And we figured it all out how we could rescue you and get you to Mars—just as a gag you know, a little excitement. That act in the Federal Building was just like an old two-dimensional movie I saw the other night at the museum. Late twentieth century I think, called, 'Hounds of the Void.' Got the book, too."

"But how do we get to Mars?" insisted Ward desperately. "Was that in the movie, too?"

"Precisely," said Red. He motioned, and Ward was stumbling and mumbling away after the red-headed taxidriver.

IN THE dim narrow sleeping cube, lit by a single ancient acho-lyte bulb, two men lay breathing feebly on the littered floor. "They'll be out for at least forty-eight hours," bragged Red. "I gave 'em both triple shots of parasthetic."

"So wha—" began Ward; then, as he looked closer, he cried, "Good Lord! It's Professor Limerick!"

Red laughed in a thin, mirthless way that sent a little tremor up Ward's spine. "That's right, Doc. Professor Limerick and his laboratory assistant. Educated morons who skip blithely down the perpetually dim halls of learning. They're scheduled to leave on the *Sol*, blasting for Marsport at 2400. You know what for?"

"No," whispered Ward faintly. "What for?"

"To study the indigenous spores of the canal peculiar to the eastern polar banks of—and I don't know what else. Fiddlers while Rome burns. Who gives a damn about indigenous spores when the Mo-Sanshon is—?"

"You seem rather vehement, Red, for a person who only pretends to believe in the Mo-Sanshon, just for a thrill."

Red relaxed, his obvious manic nervous system soothed slightly by the paraette smoke he inhaled in great drags. "Anyway, Doc, there's our passports and number one priorities to Mars. We've got two hours to get your equipment aboard. It's here in the city, ain't it?"

Ward nodded. "In a locked vault. But I didn't think anyone else knew about it but myself. If the Mo-Sanshon had—"

Red interrupted, "Wait here a minute, Doc," and disappeared into the reeking alleyway. He was back almost at once with a quick-moving, sprightly little man with a pink face and long white hair. He carried a plastic oblong box in one hand.

"This is Alsar Alingmore," said Red. "People's Artist of the Inner-Planet Folk Theatre Circuits. A philosopher. We sometimes talk of the good old days as they are referred to by malcontents. This is pro-

fessor Jonathan Ward, saviour of the Solar System. Maybe."

Alingmore bowed low. "Very fortunate to meet you, Doctor."

ALINGMORE sat the black case on a table and reverently opened it. A make-up kit, complete with plastimold, syntheskin and all the accessories of modern theatre. "He's a wizard at make-up," bragged Red. "He passed himself off as a Venusian fishman once, at a Federation Council meeting. Got his artist's license taken away from him. Now he haunts escapeasies. He's going to make us look like the scholastic idiots on the floor. We'll use their priorities and passports, and we'll be on Mars with the *Sol*. What do you think of 'Hounds of the Void' now?"

"I can't think very clearly," murmured Ward, sitting down heavily on the pneumatic couch. "Maybe it was the *satho* . . ."

In a matter of moments Ward found himself aboard the *Sol*, ensconced in a special stateroom with quartzite observation dome. He was looking at a face in the three-dim reflector that resembled Professor Limerick more than Professor Limerick himself. "I don't believe it," he said to the taxidriver who now could have passed for the assistant's zygote twin.

"Sure, we made it. Knew we would, Doc." He was sprawled out on the richly furnished gravnod bed, reading a ragged museum copy of the "Hounds of the Void." "These Guards and officials don't know how to deal with antisocials. Not enough cases in our tired order to keep them in practice. A few old time gangsters and criminals could take over the whole System in a jiffy. These representatives of Solar law and order are phonies."

Ward turned. "But the Mo-Sanshon aren't so naive, Red. They know I'm aboard. My disguise probably doesn't fool them. They know I've got the cage of mercenaries with me, too." Ward looked at the plasticage on the floor among many other cases. It contained numerous air valves and was about a yard square. It was very heavy for its size but was easily carried because of the levitation plate on the bottom. From inside of it came a steady rustling and stirring.

Ward nodded. "The Mo-Sanshon will keep on trying every means they can with-

in apparently legitimate channels to stop me before I can release those mercenaries inside their subterranean chasms. And that won't be easy for us, either. I was there four years and couldn't get anywhere near their headquarters. They've been there for centuries, aeons, before humanoid culture evolved on either world."

"I know," said Red. "How different and lonely their life must be—when you even compare it with ours. How envious and jealous they must be. And how they must hate us, buried as they are underground, hidden from the stars. Static, no individuality—that's all lost in the colony. The State is all. And someday humanity may evolve into the same death trap. No wonder they want to destroy us. They can't stand to see us keep on living, even partially free. It hurts."

Ward nodded, surprised again at Red's heterogeneous knowledge. "But, even assuming anthropomorphic attributes as they have somehow been able to do, they still are insects, with instinct rather than intelligence as we know it. They see the world, universe, their own culture with the same prejudice, egotism, and dogma. I doubt if they can even comprehend the physical facts of space, duration and distance, as we know it."

"Therefore, they shouldn't survive," said Red with sudden savage coldness. "They can't know this life, Doc, and they shouldn't live. And neither should little guys like us if we can't reach the stars. Here I am, born in an age of atomics and interplanetary travel—and I'm bored. I have to read science-fantasy from the escape literature of past centuries to keep from going psycho. Do ordinary proletarians like me get to go to Mars and Venus, or even Luna? Hell no! Have to have number one priority and who gets them? Big shots with plenty of suction, and platinum credits. Only a fraction of a percent of Earthmen have ever been outside the ionosphere. Wait'll the revolution, Doc. There'll be a spaceship on every roof landing, and two pressure suits in every closet!"

"Won't have to worry if the Mo-Sanshon takes over," said Ward as he spread some hair eradicator over his face and wiped it off with a towel. "Annihilation is a sure cure for ennui."

"And preferable," said Red softly. "I ought to know."

"Almost blastoff time," said Ward. "Let's strap in."

Red went to the door and adjusted the photo cell. "That'll have to be turned back before it'll function. Don't open it unless you know who wants it—if it's an officer, it won't make any difference. Be alert, Doc. There are Mo-Sanshon on this ship!"

"Are you certain?" said Ward quickly. "How can you be?"

"I am," said Red tensely, his lips a thin harsh line. "Very certain, Doc."

WARD breathed easier after he awoke from the effects of the sedative and found that they had at least gotten outside Earth's gravity without mishap. Only the Mo-Sanshon to worry about now. That was all, just the potential conquerors of the Solar System. Through the special observation dome into a mind-drowning eternity of devouring blackness, Ward gazed in awe. An expanse dotted with an eternity of coldly-cut, unshimmering dots of light. He wasn't new to spaceflight, but the spectacle was inexhaustible, a bottomless cup of frigid infinity.

But Red appeared mesmerized. His face stuck to the quartz, he murmured dreamily, "The void . . . deadly emptiness and waste . . . an uncharted sea without boundaries . . . when a guy's out here, he's a part of space and time . . . God, how I've wanted it . . . and I never thought I could have it . . . my world's a long way from any of this . . ." He turned slowly.

"Doc—I'd like to keep right on going, if I could. I'd go right on out beyond the Asteroids, and keep on until Jupiter faded. I'd go on out on the other side of the Life Zone until Uranus was lost. And then—well—what would be better than just to disappear in interstellar space?"

Ward swallowed a protein-vito concentrate and said he could think of a few things that might be more pleasant at the moment.

"This civilization's bad enough," said Red. "But the Mo-Sanshon is worse. It's lifeless, evil and futile."

"Right," said Ward. "But I've often wondered why they haven't conquered man before. They have the advantage of reproduction and adaptability. The Earth fly and

the Martian *trunj* can reproduce over twelve trillion in six months. Their adaptability is vastly superior. They've been around for a billion years or more on Earth and on Mars probably longer. And their number of species is overwhelming—somewhere close to a million on Earth, on Mars somewhat less. Their only trouble has been their static culture. Permanence. But now—"

"Bugs can have their mutations, too," finished Red.

Ward said, "That was my starting premise. That mutant intelligence has appeared among the Mo-Sanshon and that their leadership has spread to Earth and has influenced certain species of insects there—mainly ants, termites, and bees. On both worlds, they're now winning the battle of production. They'll be able to starve man out by taking his plants away from him and undermine his cities, which they're already doing at an alarming rate. Weakened by starvation, humanoids will be subject to disease, plague and pestilence, also brought by insects. This will be their *coup de grace*."

"And yet, Doc, you've got a way in that cage there to stop them!" Red's eyes were narrow lines behind dribbling paraette smoke.

"Right," said Ward. "And these mercenaries are certain antidotes—if we can just turn them loose among the Mo-Sanshon leaders."

"An insect menace," said Red. "Back in the age I prefer, they even stopped publishing fantasy themes about insects—overworked and too trite. And now to be a hero of an insect menace theme—"

"Was that the reason they stopped publishing that kind of stories," said Ward, "because it was overdone, trite? Maybe the editors were influenced by the Mo-Sanshon, even then. Charles Fort, you've read him? The excluded and the damned are marching."

"Fort and Korzybski, my bibles, Doc. And that's a good theory. The insects have been the most obvious threat to man's dominant position, yet they were ignored, the whole idea dropped when too much publicity was current."

Red looked at the cage. "Mercenaries," he said. "Ingenious as hell. You're a great brain, Doc."

Ward studied the enigma that was labeled Red. There was no reason not to trust him now. He almost had to. "Yes. I've managed to breed a—"

The room's lights glowed blue and then died. Ward turned, mouth suddenly dry and sticky. Someone was outside their door. Red's face was twisted, his real expression showing through the plastmold and syntheskin makeup. It was one of burning hate. He leaped into the middle of the room in a half crouch. "It's one of them!" he hissed between tight teeth. "It's the Mo-Sanshon."

Ward said, "How can you tell?"

"No time for dialectics," said Red, voice trembling with emotion. "It's the Executive Officer of the *Sol*, no less. And you can't keep an Officer out. His keys'll open the banks, anyway."

Ward was getting callous. "Needle him, then. And he'll disappear. They can't blame us for a non-existent corpse."

"No!" grated Red. "There are others aboard. He has others waiting in the hall. I've got to stay hidden, understand that, Doc. That's the only way I can help you, and without that help, you'll never accomplish anything. You've got to trust me. I'll get the cage out of here and hide it."

"But—" began Ward.

"I'll hide here among these crates. You let 'em in. We'll see what happens."

This time the banks functioned, and Red ducked down out of sight. The panel slid slowly into the wall. The Officer standing framed in the opening was grossly huge, with a pasty dead white face and expressionless glassy eyes. His voice was low and hollow. He stepped inside and the door slid closed. Ward felt a smothering trapped cloud enveloping him, greater than any he had known so far, thick like poison air. Even the Executive Officer of a luxuriant space liner like the *Sol*! The inhumanness of the creature was obvious to Ward, but he could understand why it wouldn't be to those uninformed. A little insight made all the difference. Why hadn't Red needled him as he stood here? The cage, of course, but then—besides no one would suspect a passenger listed as Professor Limerick, harmless botanist and—

"You will come with me, Professor Ward." It wasn't a question.

"You must have the wrong compart-

ment. I'm Professor Limerick. I'm going to study the indigenous spores along the canal at—"

"Doctor Ward, please," the phlegmatic voice said. "You've suspected we are telepathic. Now you know. It is a superior weapon. We know you killed one of us in Washington, and that you registered as Professor Limerick and his assistant—" the cumbersome head swayed. "By the way, where is he?"

"In the gaming rooms," said Ward quickly. "He . . . er . . . plays chess."

"You will come with me now," repeated the monotonous voice. The body shifted slightly.

"Will I?" said Ward. "You have no such right. As a passenger of—"

"You are a labeled psycho. I have full authority to confine you in a psychocell until we reach Mars. There is no other way. Our other methods have failed. For a human male, you have rather a finely developed mind. You will die enroute of—natural causes. A ship can never be held responsible for what happens to a psycho's unpredictable nervous system in space."

Ward's eyes circled the room. Red! For God's sake, Red! The cage of mercenaries rustled. The Mo-Sanshon retreated instinctively, then suddenly, with amazing agility, jumped between Ward and the cage. "It is too late," it said. "We shall take care of the cage for you. We shall release it in space." He reached for Ward.

He would have fought, but he knew there were others waiting outside. Red had said so, and he believed Red. The important thing was to clear this room long enough for Red to take the cage out and conceal it somewhere on the great liner.

"I'll come," he said. It eased his badly depressed ego to admit the obvious.

BLACKNESS and indescribable pain indefinitely prolonged, intermingled with a kind of eternity in the stygian night of the psychocell. There was no time in the blackness, so that forever and now, all concepts of time, merged into only pain. The Mo-Sanshon were killing him with sound.

There would be no evidence. The pain impinged with hideous slowness, played over his nerves like liquid flame. It coursed through his veins, his spine, until he shook

and twitched with agony for which there is no speech interpretation. It exploded again and again in his mind, and grew steadily into a monstrous continuous hell.

He was aware of periods of screaming and slobbering. He remembered indefinite episodes in which he was on his feet, hopping and jerking katatonically like a mad electric marionette. Every nerve cell jiggled; each separate nerve was erratic anguish.

Sometime later, still in the timeless blackness, he was stiffly outstretched on his face, his lips murmuring in a salty-tasting pool, either blood, sweat, or both, making hoarse, rattling animal noises.

What a way to die! How many others would die this way, or in even more ingeniously inhuman ways, beneath the emotionless alien dictates of the Mo-Sanshon!

And, sometime after that, he discovered that the ghastly torture had stopped. His body reacted like rubber stretched to maximum, then abruptly released. He was rolling, sobbing in an ecstasy of freedom.

He heard the sliding of a grate, and saw a narrow slit of pale light. He couldn't move toward the sound, and even the harsh whisper had little reality for Ward.

"Doc. Doc. It's me, Red. You still kicking?"

Ward listened for a long time before he finally heard a voice resembling his. "I don't know. I really don't know."

"I finally found the subsonic generator and reversed it. Have to do it that way, gradually, or the shock kills you. Took quite a while. I hid the cage down in the cargo hanger, and I stay down there and guarded it most of the time. They've searched almost everywhere, but I keep moving it from place to place. If you want to know how I got in good with the duty watch down there, it cost me a hundred platinum credits. And don't ask me how I got the credits. You sure you're all right now?"

"Guess so. Little weak. What are you going to do now?"

"This is the climax of the 'Hounds of the Void' picture," said Red. "The hero is going to get you out of here. I'm going to wreck the *Sol*. In the confusion we can escape."

"Wreck the—!" Ward subsided in the darkness, resigned.

"It's simple, Doc. I'm going to destroy

the forward fuel-injectors. The braking rockets won't work then, and everybody aboard will have to bail out in air-sleds. They'll never notice us in all the bedlam. We hope."

"But the cage of mercenaries . . . ?"

"Take that along in an air-sled. We won't be the only ones that'll grab up some excess luggage."

"But Red," whispered Ward. "You can't do that until we get inside Mars gravity. By that time the Executive Officer will start working on me again. I couldn't stand another dosage, Red."

That thin cold laugh again. Ward didn't know why he shuddered. "These psyocells fool your duration sense, Doc. We're already inside Mars gravity. You been in there a long time. Here's some food concentrate. Now rest up and be ready. See you."

LATER, Ward's tautly waiting senses were jarred by a thunderous explosion. For a moment it seemed the whole ship would fall apart as the liquid oxygen and its catalyst power units beneath the control turret went off. Even inside the padded walls of his psychocell, Ward could hear the repercussions of the dreadful explosions—cries and screams of fear, horror, confusion, mass hysteria. From an inter-ship audio in the corridor outside his cell door, he heard the Captain's frantic desperate tone, the voice of a man unused to emergencies.

"What has happened down there, Thomas?"

"Forward fuel-injectors completely destroyed, sir. Braking rockets beyond repair."

Panic was ill-concealed in the Captain's voice now. "Break out pressure suits. And prepare air-sleds! Neutralize gravity plates! Abandon ship on signal!"

The *Sol* was a doomed ship. She was well inside Mars' maximum gravity pull, and even its tellalloy hull couldn't stand the unbraked friction of its inevitable roaring drive. The neutralized gravity procedure of the Captain was a frantic irrational command, such a method being employed on asteroids and moons or such byway stops. The *Sol* would soon blister and melt and smash into Mars, a charred shell.

The door opened quickly. The Executive Officer's gross mass filled the glaring light of the opening. Ward struggled to his feet, hopelessly unprepared for fight. He wasn't an aggressive man, physically, and had never been athletic. But he knew the theoretical value of attack, and he leaped with all his minimized strength straight at the massive barrel chest.

Then they were struggling in the narrow, shuddering corridor. The creature made no sound, but fought with a stolid, elephantine power, without emotion or expression. And Ward was like tinsel in those alien arms. His clawing hands found no flesh, but only thick, leatheroid syntheskin, hard and unresilient. He struggled, writhed, and struck frantically, but nothing about this creature was vulnerable to such an attack. His fists were bruised and smashed. The creature's arms tightened in inexorable jerks about him. His brain was swelling, preparing to burst . . .

The sound was familiar now, the sharp *thunggg* of Red's needle gun. The plopping sound as it pierced the anthropomorphic. He felt the creature stiffen and its arms flew away from Ward, flailing in terrible anguish. An inhuman cry rang in his ears. He saw Red crouched there in that tigerish, fiendish manner he had displayed in the Federal Building.

Again he was watching the incredible, reeling metamorphosis—the rapid disintegration of that towering organism into—

Nothing remained but some buttons and a large zipper talon.

As they ran up the corridor, now growing noticeably warmer from the terrific friction on the hull, Ward's strength seeped slowly back into his veins, and his eyes accustomed themselves to the light. Soon he and Red were molecules in a surging agitated stream of a running, shouting, stamping and utterly frantic mob. No one noticed them in the bedlam.

Suddenly Red grabbed Ward's hand. "Trust me, Doc. I'll take the cage. They will recognize you, and I think I can make it all right. We'll both take different air-sleds. See you."

Ward yelled—but Red was gone in the bedlam. But what could he have said? How could he have objected? It was logically the best way. He trusted Red because

he had to. Ward fought his way through the yammering crowds, got his pressure suit, entered an airlock and climbed into the spherical cramped interior of a jam-packed air-sled.

The Ensign at the controls was visibly trembling. Two ancient dowagers were hysterically screaming like frightened parrots. A chubby, bejeweled Martian Monel Metals representative was taking para-pills to quiet his nerves, enough to kill a horse. He passed out. The daughter of Vasco Von Belscon, who practically owned the Space Lines, was clinging to a young man who was, in turn, clinging to someone else and mumbling fearfully about the obviously untrue axiom that everything would be all right.

"This—this sled is overcrowded," quavered the Ensign. "Be calm and don't try to cause trouble. We'll be lucky if we don't smash up. I don't think our levitation plates are sufficiently heterodyned for this great a load. And there's no adjustment can be made at this short notice."

"See here," yelled Ward, "why commit suicide then?"

The Ensign turned a wan face. "I'll try to coast her in. Perhaps the balance is such that a long trajectory and a crash landing is possible."

Then the single light in the air-lock flashed twice. The lock opened, and the air-sled catapulted out with the outrushing atmosphere. Awed, helpless screams reverberated through the jammed interior as they watched the upward hurtling ball of Mars. A reddish crescent blur, with directly below a wide long crimson streak; to the side was the fading radiance of Diemos' disc, while to the other side the planet seems to slumber in a darkness more profound than that of oceanic space, the black tomb where Phobos had just died.

The many air-sleds disgorged by the *Sol* were scattered so that only one or two others were visible in the far distance. And plunging down and away in a smoking trajectory that would take it almost clear around the planet, the *Sol* was crashing to her doom.

And, as far as Ward was concerned, so was the air-sled.

The geography of Mars was discernible. Ward saw the dead sea bottoms of Barsoom, soon obliterated by mountains; the

rusted tundras of Taclos bordered by the thousand-mile-long, towering mountain chain of the Aljontors passed beneath them. On the other side was the seemingly endless red desert expanse that sloped into the artificial Cehlaz Sea and the ancient city of Marsport, formerly Ogolkor.

"I think we can crash-land," said the Ensign faintly. "We could be lighter though." Ward looked down. They were cutting through incredibly rarefied air. The sky was cloudless, of an intensely dark blue shade that spoke at once of a thinned atmosphere. They were crashing directly into the great clay desert. Well, that's where he'd been trying to get all the time, but now he didn't have his mercenaries with him.

The desert—a blazing expanse of ferric oxidized clay, a brilliant red, glazed by centuries of heat and wind until it glistened like the side of a vast porcelain bowl. Veins of millions of cracks that were really gigantic chasms crossed it like the roadways of millions of mad engineers. Deep down in those catacombs were the intricate, unexplored regions of the Mo-Sanshon and practically the whole insect species remaining on Mars. Part of the folklore and legend of the earliest known history of surface tribes, they had been feared, revered, studied, ignored, and ridiculed by successive stages of surface civilization.

A strained, paralyzed silence pervaded the spheroid. Not even a whimper broke it.

"This is it," shouted the Ensign hysterically, and Ward closed his eyes as a long horrible jarring grind seemed to rip his nerves to pieces. . . .

THE red desert was an incredible desolation of dehydrated, shimmering emptiness before Ward's blurred and burning eyes. Dry, gasping heat, enhanced by thin air filled with fine particles of rust. The ancient, devastated planet kept clinging to life; Ward had often wondered why.

The clay on which he was outstretched was like burning metal against his bruised body. Through pain-mist, he saw the twisted wreckage of the air-sled about a hundred feet away. Low hills that looked unbelievably far away—everything wavering feverishly through the shimmering haze. Then he looked down the length of his body at his right leg. It was crushed,

swollen, blue, with little sharp bone splinters edging through tattered flesh.

He unscrewed his helmet and unzipped his pressure suit, to crawl out of it painfully with the shattered leg. He lay, gasping, his fingers scraping along the glazed clay. Phobos was setting in the East again. Deimos was a crimson-rimmed eye, hesitating above the desert before blinking out. He'd been out for quite a while. No other figures were stirring in the yellow moonlight, the startlingly bright moonlight as clear as Earth dusk. Probably all the passengers were dead, or there would be some sign of life, unless those who survived had wandered away.

He gritted his teeth as tears of pain smarted in his eyes; he commenced dragging himself along. He kept crawling. Deimos had set. A thick darkness settled over him, and bitter cold. And, sometime later, just as Phobos rose brightly in the rarefied air, he was stopped by a gaping dark depth of fissure. He had gone as far as he could go toward—

—Where? There wasn't a place for him now. He wanted to see the end of the Mo-Sanshon's dreams of conquest, and he wondered if he ever could, now.

The whining of a jet-car spiraled toward him. The sound of it died, as he saw its shadow settle on the gleaming surface of the desert clay. A Martian make, from the sound, new style. A figure emerged and walked toward him. Soon she was close enough to distinguish in the soft glow of the moonlight.

An unattractive girl was very exceptional. But no less exceptional than beauty such as this girl displayed boldly and proudly. She was running swiftly toward him, the thin gauze garments styled by Martian women moulding her body like wet silk. The soft thin boots of desert *jhan's* hide made no sound on the stone-hard clay. Her shadow elongated across the softly glowing brilliance of the surface like shading in a Rulahn three-dim painting.

Suddenly, intuitively, Ward's skin crawled with horror, and he tried to drag himself away to the edge of the bottomless crevice. Then her arms were reaching down. Her shadow covered him like a shroud. Her hands clutched his jacket and pulled him away from the brink of the abyss.

Ward could sense them now even before they touched him. Their alien radiations impinged on his raw nerves now like a mental file. She appeared so human. But then you touched her, and felt those terrible alien tendrils in your brain, and you knew—

And from some deep reservoir he summoned the strength to act. He grabbed frantically for those shapely, but synthetic legs.

One of them jerked out of reach, but both his hands closed over the other. He heaved sidewise, and the beautiful bronzed torso went over him. Half of it dangled down into the crevice. Her legs flailed for traction. A low grunting as of effort came up stolidly from the chasm, as he tried with rapidly waning strength to push her over. But her arms dug in while she struggled in a frothing sea of titian-colored, synthetic hair that shone in the moonlight like liquid copper. Great surges of alien power battered at his rebounding mind as he fought. The body lifted and the perfect oval face edged into view, twisted with effort. Even, pearly teeth glistened with strain. The weird, intangible light of the whole Mo-Sanshon shown on that rigid expressionless face—no emotion, no human consciousness. A face from an antedeluvian hell, with instinctual motivations lost in the slime of time.

Ward called up another ounce of reserve and she cried out as she went almost entirely over the edge of the chasm. She was clinging now with only one leg and arm. He was pushing against that face, beating desperately, sobbing, beating with smashed fists against a beautiful face like thick leather.

And then something emerged into the moonlight out of the crevice.

Ward, etomologist though he was, found it hard to realize that he was looking at a kind of *Corynocoris Distinctus* almost a third as large as a human body. He fell back before it, crawling, dragging himself like a groveling dog. Hideous, unworldly creature, with six horny legs, a pair of popping-out eyes, two shining *ocelli* which looked straight into the rapidly frosting air, and a long, ferocious, quivering beak partly hidden behind one of the forelegs. The furry, spiny horror jumped at him. A sickening stench enveloped him as the

body covered him, the legs pinning him in as in a cage.

Ward felt something insane creeping into his consciousness. He felt his rationality, such as remained, leaking out through his tortured eyes like blood. He prayed for a quick death, now that Red had the cage and would release the mercenaries. What did it matter about him? He was washed up anyway, and—

The titan-haired pseudo-woman with her Dianaesque body and her dead eyes, was on her feet and stood familiarly beside the distorted crab-like *Corynocoris*. Very difficult to believe that they might be from the same stalk. But Ward's senses were dulled now. He lay helplessly waiting. He had lost much blood and had been drained of energy. Her form shifted hazily like a mirage. She must be desperate, filled with burning hatred of him, burning white-hot, and her emotionless, stolid voice was more horrible because of that.

"You did not bring the cage from the ship. But you know where it is, and other information which we demand." A statement. "You must come with me to the Cavern of the Queen."

She said nothing more, only made a gesture and the *Corynocoris* dragged him away. Down into the chasm, down further than Ward dared think about, and through corridors and labyrinthine passages that glowed with a strange phosphorescent effulgence. And reeked with some other vague, intangible quality of alienness that filled Ward's fevered brain with horror.

Mists cleared, thickened, swirled, died and solidified; consciousness returned in degrees of awareness, stirred with nightmare. And, some time later, he heard the toneless voice of the sexless beauty say simply:

"Our Queen. Your conqueror."

HE SHOOK foggy poisonous vapor from his head and sat up. He was in a gigantic cavern of ominous, crushing size, a roughly arching height that disappeared into steamy vapor. Stalactites and stalagmites barred the openings of numerous side tunnels like monstrous teeth in gaping mouths.

From somewhere came the monody of dripping waters. A sickening, silent iridescence filled the chamber of horrors with

a clear yellow light. Ward's eyes focused on—

He shrank back away from the awesome height and the narrow slit of white light high, high above through the mist that might have been the new Martian sun. His eyes kept returning to the thing in the middle of the cavern floor. It rested in a transparent plastic bowl that sat on top of a huge iridescent bell-shaped stalagmite built up through thousands of years of dripping calcareous water.

Inside the bowl rested a giant slug-like body. It exuded a greyish glow as it pulsed and shimmered. Two vast compound eyes looked out into the cavern and a number of simpler eyes moved slowly about with a placid kind of rhythm.

"The Queen," he whispered, repeating the word of the woman-creature. He'd thought it part of a nightmare. His whisper echoed violently through the cavern like a rising wind of fear. The Queen of the Mo-Sanshon. The Queen Mother. Summation, final cause, goal, archetype, of the State.

The woman-creature moved, eyes fixed on the bowl as though communicating.

She finally turned toward where Ward crouched helplessly on the cold, moist stone, his crushed leg projecting out uselessly. The nerveless face moved, gave out sounds like frost. "Our Queen has decided. You know where the cage of mercenaries is. You had it on the *Sol*. Because of your inferior nervous system which is so vulnerable to attack, you will soon give us the information we want. You and the cage are all that stands in our way."

"I don't know where it is," said Ward truthfully. "So regardless of what you do to my inferior nerves, I can't tell you where it is. Someone else took it with them from the *Sol*. Of course you don't believe me."

The great sentient blob of breeding-brain machinery called the Queen Mother, pulsed on without perturbation. The creature beside him seemed unaffected; yet both of them must be trembling with fear, hate and indecision. An organization of females. And up there was the one Queen Mother for the lot of them who layed all the eggs of her species, and dictated the policies for the rest. The workers, soldiers, nurses—everyone was female. Even those

who had assumed male humanoid form, such as the Executive Officer on the *Sol* and the Guard in the Federal Building, they were also female.

And the male—those representatives, those voters of humanoid cultures—where were they? They didn't exist as such. They were simply created as mates for the younger Queens. After the marriage flight they died, after a brief wholly utilitarian span devoted solely to the continuation of the Colony.

And he, Ward, a lowly Male, stood in their way. Ward reasoned that only through intense study over centuries of time had they been able to grasp enough humanoid concepts to even be able to recognize such an impossible situation. He, a lowly male—part of a ruling class!

A twenty-foot, brown, chitinous form scurried ferociously out of the shadows and rushed toward Ward. He tried to rise and escape, but his shattered, swollen leg stopped him in a burst of blinding pain.

It was an incredibly big giant of the Myriapoda class, having a long hard shiny body with many similar pairs of legs, each as large as Ward's finger. He plainly saw, without benefit of microscope now, the pair of antennae, three pairs of mouth parts, two groups of simple *ocelli* which ogled him hungrily. And then Ward's fevered, shocked consciousness was concentrating on the poison fangs projecting out from its first body segment.

He knew they were intended for him.

VERIFICATION came quickly. The woman-creature beside him simply said, "You will be injected with a paralysis secretion. Permanent disability. Its eggs will hatch under your skin, and the larvae will burrow into your body. You will die many kinds of deaths, and you will tell the Queen and the Mo-Sanshon what they want to know. You will tell where the cage is, how the mercenaries are created and how they operate. You will tell us where your notes and formulae are located. After that you will die as all males learn to die—for the Mo-Sanshon."

Ward didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. Protestations would be futile here. The centipede-like monstrosity waved its fangs and edged nearer. The woman-creature spoke again.

"The Queen wishes me to say to you that your humanoid species is unjustified in its egomania. You think humanoids the most rapidly evolving organism in the Solar System, but that belief is not relative enough in regards to duration. Our culture had reached a degree of social organization more highly advanced than yours before what you call the Tertiary epoch. Once our culture ruled a world—Mars. Why did our culture stop, why did it not advance for thousands of years? Why did our marvelous instinctive culture fail to conquer the System? Why have we stood still after perfecting a type of super social science? We simply had advanced as far as we could without benefit of violent, drastic mutation."

"May I ask one question," managed Ward, "before I become food for centipede larvae?" No reply. The centipede writhed impatiently. Ward tried to ignore it. "How," he asked, "do you create these imitation human organisms?"

"Specialization. Of specialization the so-called 'insect' species are the accepted genius of all species of life wherever they are found. Given species can reproduce equal, and in many cases superior, creations of humanoid intelligence by individual adaptation. There are more specialized types among our kind than all other organisms in the System combined. The Mo-Sanshon is now master of them all."

That was, of course, true, thought Ward. There were insects that could spin cables stronger in ratio than any alloy strands, could create acids that undermined stone and steel, could create cities that, in proportion, dwarfed human cities into significance; they had perfected telepathy; they could grow wings, develop gills and live in water as mud or marine worms, or fly in the air, or burrow into the land. Their superiority was accomplished through specialized millions of marvelous individual instincts.

The centipede moved close, and its *ocelli* gazed at Ward fixedly. Its many legs quivered. Its fangs reached out and brushed lightly over Ward's shrinking body.

"Where is the mercenary cage?" the voice asked again.

Ward said weakly, "I don't know." He thought of a nice home-loving girl back in Midcity who could cook wonderfully

and who liked babies and whose name was Ann, before he said, "Tell the damn centipede to get it over with."

The centipede struck, but in the middle of its darting move a crackling explosion hit it. Its chitinous shell curled, crackled, and the centipede knotted up into a tight burned lump.

A SCREAM of hate and fear rang through the colossal cavern beneath the Martian deserts. Ward turned, his eyes dimmed. It was Red. Somewhere he had gotten hold of an electronic blaster and had paused, blasted the centipede, and was now running on across the cavern. He held the levitated cage easily in one hand.

He waved the gun at Ward and his thin face smiled. He stopped half way between Ward and the towering translucent bowl that housed the Queen Mother of the Mo-Sanshon. But the normal pulsing of the giant breeding brain was visibly agitated now. It shivered in pounding undulations. Waves of frantic force emanated from its throbbing bulk.

Ward saw the woman-creature beside him lean forward, her hands trembling. Her voice was a bit higher, that was all. "You! You live, Molakh! You were dead!"

Red laughed as he unfastened the cage door. It was a drawn taut laugh, without mirth. Ward yelled, "Red! I understand now! Don't open it! Suicide if you—"

Red's face was a mask of hate and conflicting emotions in the yellow glow. The makeup was almost all gone, giving his face a ragged, weird aspect.

"Right, Doc," he said. "A radical male. A revolting male. We get them every once in a while here. There are many kinds of mutation. They use them for experimentation in the laboratories. You should see the laboratories here, Doc, with bugs secreting chemicals and living bodies as test tubes. I was one of their recent experiments with humanoid duplication. They thought they had disposed of me, but I eluded them. I'm a slippery individual, you know. I found out about your work and knew you were right, and I decided to help you. Only I could have helped you, Doc. Thanks, Doc, for the adventure. You'll never know what it means to feel the grandeur of the stars—you've never been a myopic bug."

THE gray pulpy mass in the bowl was shivering now, pulsing in great heaving like a heart, dying. And then a dull growing swishing was audible from all sides like a slowly rising wind.

Ward saw the polyglot of insect horror that was edging in through the various tunnels and corridors. Great, jumping spiders with hairy legs and many coal-black glittering eyes and poison fangs dripping below. Winged Hippiscus with huge jaws working hungrily. Sharp-jawed Paratenodera, and shining-winged Cemenarium. And countless others, though ant and termite forms dominated, with a grotesque intermingling of anthropomorphic shapes that had assumed almost every possible degree of distortion of human development.

And in the center of the ring stood Red with the cage unfastened. Ward's mouth was cotten. His heart pounded madly. His face exuded streams of sweat. Red, a Mo-Sanshon, a rebel, a mutant. No wonder he had talked of how he longed for freedom. How he had hated female culture, the Mo-Sanshon! The synthesization and study had brought about a high degree of anthroponomy, although his acquired knowledge of human culture had been of the past rather than the present. His revolt had been one of extremes. He came from a social system whose complete submergence in the colony struck his individualism with horror, and he had reacted to the opposite extreme—a worship of anarchy.

"No, Red!" Ward was screaming wildly, irrationally. "Don't open it! If you do—" But then the ring of monsters would anyway.

Red's answer was to open the cage.

Shuddering, retching, Ward closed his eyes. His experiments had enabled him to breed and evolve strains of armored, ferocious parasite insects and germs which could be bred in millions, any number required, and whose powers of reproduction was enormous. Soon there'd be a stupendous army of these warrior insects who would specifically and effectively control the Mo-Sanshon. He had perfected these mercenaries in laboratories, and had succeeded in isolating and inbreeding, by the most intricate processes involving ray mu-

tation of infinitely small genes. He had cultivated new insect-like forms, like one of our other ancient scientists did garden peas. Armies of insects to do man's fighting for him against his insect enemies.

He had developed a thousand living specimens and tested them. Any opposing species of insect, regardless of size, they devoured immediately. The thousand were in that cage. They would sweep across the insects they were bred to destroy and devour it in seconds, as their own ant-prototypes stripped humans to bare skeletons in seconds.

Ward had to open his eyes again. He was crawling . . . crawling . . . dragging his infected leg behind him, unconscious of the pain. Crawling beneath a dense, black buzzing cloud of whirring wings and clicking mandibles. The vengeful army of insect mercenaries were descending on the helpless Queen Mother in swarms, and the ring of insects that had been closing in were now trying frantically to escape. Many of them did. But the mercenaries would hunt them out. They were specialized mass killers.

And the first one they had gotten, of course, had been Red.

THE dense hordes of enthusiastic insect warriors ignored Ward as he crawled to the cage. Nothing remained of Red except his clothing, shredded, and a few bits of tendons on which mercenaries still fed ferociously. And a tattered copy of an ancient Twentieth Century thriller called "Hounds of the Void."

High overhead, a direct beam of sunlight filtered down through the spiraling vapor, glinted on sheeny wings, as Ward sprawled out on the hard, cold stone. He would make it all right now. There would be evidence now to clear him of his psycho label, and the Mo-Sanshon would be wiped out. But Red was gone. Red, the Adventurer.

Ward wondered why it hadn't occurred to him before. He, an entomologist, too. But the pronunciation had fooled him. The sharp accent on the "i" had distorted its true significance. Spelled out, Formica meant ANT, of course.

RED ANT.